WMSE's First Months: Busy Phones, Positive Feedback

By Rod Gnerlich
Director of Communications

Pilot of the airwaves, here is my request.
You don't have to play it, but I hope you'll do your best.
I've been list'nin to your show on the radio,
And you seem like a friend to me.

--Charlie Dore

The requests have been coming in bunches since the new MSOE student-operated radio station, WMSE (91.7 FM on the dial), went on the air in the hours before its formal St. Patrick's Day opening ceremonies. And although the students are just beginning to scratch the surface in the area of programming, the community response has been highly encouraging.

Because WMSE is an educational station, it is obligated to be noncommercial. And it's exactly that aspect of the station that has contributed greatly to its popularity. In the weeks prior to WMSE's sign-on, the Milwaukee Journal had carried stories about area listener

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Eric Bohnsack of the Radio Broadcasters Club, shows some of the new equipment at WMSE to Professor Ray Palmer of the MSOE Electrical Engineering Department.

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disenchantment with "formula music programming" and several readers had written its TV-Radio critic, Mike Drew, to point out WMSE's deviation from this norm. Drew also was favorable in his remarks about the station.

The music? Name it ... new wave, fusion, oldies, folk, country, bluegrass, classical, rhythm and blues ... it's all aired on WMSE at one time or another. "Everything from Abba to Zappa," as Radio Broadcasters Club President Chris Jacobson puts it. In addition, WMSE airs programs such as Public Policy Forums, MSOE athletic events, and interviews with local or visiting musical groups and MSOE faculty and staff members.

"Our nonmusical programming is still in its infancy, but we are continuing to work out new ideas," Jacobson said.

MSOE owns the license to the station and Dean of Students Patrick Coffey serves as the station's general manager. Professor Thomas Davis, Electrical Engineering Department Chairman, and Professor Emil Symonik, Head of the MSOE English Department, are the station's advisors.

Although the Radio Broadcasters Club's Executive Council sets the policy for the station, it does so in close cooperation with the college Administration. "We've been in much closer contact with the President's Office, for example, since we went to a 1,000 watt FM station," Jacobson said.

The opening ceremonies were the high point of St. Patrick's Week this year. MSOE alumnus Everett Cobb, who donated $30,000 to make the station a reality, was on hand along with many members of the MSOE Board of Regents, Corporation, and faculty, staff, and students. WTMJ-TV was on hand to cover the opening ceremonies while WITI-TV's John Drilling did a special feature on Cobb and the station that afternoon. Cobb was honored at the ceremonies along with Milwaukee alumni William Gainer, Richard Ryan, Dean Hock, and Michael Pikula, who helped develop the new station.

MSOE students had been operating an internal radio station, WSOE-AM, for 56 years. That station ceased operations when WMSE debuted. The students originally tried to get a 10-watt FM license but none were available. Cobb's generosity enabled the students to apply for the 1,000-watt license, the last educational one available in Milwaukee.

The listener response has surprised even the station's student operators. "The phone just doesn't stop ringing," Jacobson said. "When we give out the phone number for requests at the top of the hour it will ring for the next 20 minutes straight. The people can't believe what's coming out of their radios ... it's music that the local stations are just too formatted to play.

"That musical programming will eventually grow. Right now our people are just getting started out and all they know, with regard to playing music on the air, is what they've heard the other stations play. In order to play alternative music you have to get educated to it ... you have to learn how to like it and develop an appreciation for such forms as fusion which the other stations won't play because it won't sell commercials."

The students realize that they aren't receiving the vast audience that the local stations have established but have great respect for their own listeners. "It's the toughest audience to try and please," Jacobson said. "They're very selective. We suspected that there were some discontented people out there who would like what we're putting out over the air."

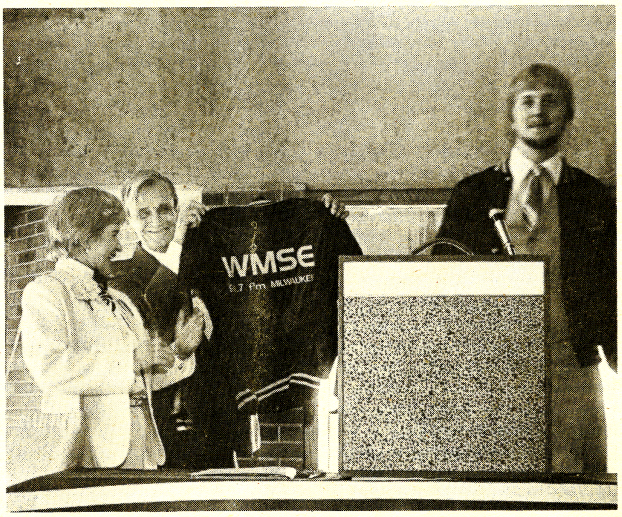
Going from an AM station with a reach of only several blocks to a 1,000-watt station reaching the entire metropolitan Milwaukee area can be a rather giant leap — and an overwhelming one for a student disk jockey. "The first couple of days you'd see a person go over to cue a record and his hand would be shaking like a leaf. I was sure when it was my turn. But now it's gotten to be pretty much old hat," Jacobson said. "You were always nervous your first time on the air, even with the old station. But it's so much more intense now, knowing that we're reaching the whole city. It's a tremendous responsibility."

Though only two months old, MSOE's "pilots of the airwaves" appear to have handled the responsibility well — and turned WMSE into a viable listening alternative for Milwaukee's radio audience.

MSOE Board of Regents Chairman Carl Weigell, center, and Regent George Schuett received a guided tour of the WMSE facilities from Radio Broadcasters Club members from left, John Hoelzhammer, John Endries and Chris Black.

MSOE alumnus Everett Cobb, whose donation put WMSE on the air, looked over some of the station's materials with, from left, Rick Ryan, Dean Hock, Broadcasters Club advisor Professor Thomas Davis and Cobb's wife, Elanore.

Radio Broadcasters Club president Chris Jacobson discussed the new station's plans at the WMSE Opening Ceremonies.



The Cobb's display Everett's new WMSE jacket, presented by Radio Broadcasters Club president Chris Jacobson, at the WMSE Opening Ceremonies.